

This morning, I am in the second week of a new sermon series through the Old Testament book of Daniel that will take us up until the summer. I've entitled the series "Faithfulness in exile," a title that may at first glance seem to be about something that happened a long time ago in a kingdom far, far away, but I believe you will find is very relevant to your life today. Let's begin by reading Daniel 1:1-7:

***Daniel 1** - In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house **of his god**. ³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility-- ⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature **of the Babylonians**. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. ⁶ Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Beltshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.*

Last week, we looked at the historical setting of the book of Daniel, because if you want to read the Bible accurately and apply it to your life accurately, you need to read it in context, including its historical context. Daniel takes place during a time in Israel's history known as the exile, when God disciplined Israel for their sins by allowing a foreign power, Babylon, to besiege them and carry off many of the leaders and nobility into slavery in Babylon. You may not realize it, but Daniel and his friends are only teenagers in this book. And as we see in verses 4-7, instead of killing all of the Israelites, King Nebuchadnezzar sets in motion a plan to reprogram these young men, to mold them into the Babylonian image so that they might be useful to him. He does this in three specific ways:

- 1) **Isolation** – What I mean by that is that Nebuchadnezzar tries to separate them from their religious heritage and community and devotion to their God by changing their names. From:

Daniel (God is my judge) to Beltshazzar (Bel is my protector)
 Hananiah (The Lord is gracious) to Shadrach (servant of Sin)

Mishael (who is what God is?) to Meshach (the shadow of the prince)
Azariah (The Lord is a helper) to Abednego (the servant of Ishtar)

As we will find out later in the book, there will be no worship or teaching or praying or fellowship in the ways of the Hebrew God. They will be isolated from that way of life.

- 2) **Indoctrination** – They are taught the language and literature of the Babylonians. This would have included astrology and divination, among other subjects.
- 3) **Seduction** – They are given a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table, the greatest delicacies that Babylon has to offer, in order to win them over with the pleasures of the culture

The three-year plan is to shift their allegiance from their God and culture to the Babylonian gods and culture by isolating them, indoctrinating them, and seducing them. The goal is to remove any distinctiveness, any Jewishness, any faithfulness to the God of their homeland from them and to make them over in the Babylonian image.

Now, let's zoom out from Daniel. Remember that the focus of this series is on how to be faithful in exile, how to be faithful to God in a land that is not our home. **As I mentioned last week, the themes of Babylon and exile show up repeatedly in the Bible, as the writers remind us that this world is not our home, that if we trust in Jesus, we are exiles, citizens of heaven living in a country that is not our true home. And Babylon, throughout the Bible, comes to represent any earthly kingdom or empire that sets itself up against God. And yes, we can apply that to America even if we love our country.** So we can learn a lot from Daniel about how to be faithful to God even in an American culture.

Let's continue to read to see how Daniel responds:

⁸ *But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.* ⁹ *Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel,* ¹⁰ *but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."* ¹¹ *Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and*

Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them **for ten days**. ¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. ¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand **visions and dreams of all kinds**. ¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in **his whole kingdom**. ²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

How does Daniel respond to the reprogramming? The text doesn't tell us that he fights the renaming or the reeducating, but he does decide to fight the food and wine. Why did he refuse to partake in the royal food and wine? The text doesn't say, other than he did not want to defile himself. It may have been his desire to eat according to the dietary laws of the Hebrews. But the wine would not have necessarily been off limits. **My guess is that with regards to the name, even if they called him Belteshazzar, he could still call himself Daniel. With the education, he could still measure everything he was taught by the truth of God's Word and not believe everything as true. But with regards to the food and wine of the king's table, he was unwilling to be seduced and tempted by the delicacies of the kingdom.** I think Daniel recognized that of all the reprogramming, it wasn't the isolation and indoctrination that was going to be the challenge as much as the seduction. And so, Daniel approaches the chief official for permission not to partake in the food and wine. The official is ambivalent, because he likes Daniel but does not want to get in trouble with the king. But Daniel asks him to do it for 10 days and then to see how he looks in comparison with everyone else.

And God is gracious to them. After the 10-day test, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah prove to be more healthy than the other people who eat the royal food. And so, in this one area, Daniel preserves his distinctiveness, resists the temptations and delicacies of Babylon, and God blesses him for his courage and conviction. God gives them knowledge, understanding, and to Daniel he gives the ability to interpret visions and dreams. The king is impressed by Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, and they enter the king's service as favored servants.

Now, we may be living thousands of years after Daniel in a land far away from Babylon, but many things have not changed. We still live in the midst of a culture trying to make us over into its image, and are opposed by a spiritual enemy who wants to pull us away from God. And the tactics used by Babylon are very much in use today:

Isolation – separate you from your religious heritage and community and devotion to God

Indoctrination – teach you the language and literature of the culture

Seduction – win you over with the pleasures of the world

Certainly one common example of this is when **believing teens go off to college**. They experience isolation from worship, fellowship and teaching about God. They are indoctrinated into the world's way of thinking about philosophy, anthropology, science, and religion. And they are seduced into a lifestyle of worldly pleasures, surrounded by parties and drinking and drug use and sexually curious young men and women, among other things. And the next thing you know, God is forgotten, and they are full citizens of the city of man, residents of a modern-day Babylon.

But it can happen at work as well. You are isolated from godly influence and fellowship. You are indoctrinated into the company's values and way of doing things. And you are seduced into the temptations of promotion, power, prestige, wealth, and success. And the next thing you know, God is forgotten, and you are living for Babylon.

And it can even happen at home. You can isolate yourself from fellowship and godly influence. You can be indoctrinated by the advertisements you see every day, what you see on TV or online. You can be seduced into what this world has to offer. And the next thing you know, God is forgotten, and you are living for Babylon.

You may not be exiled in a foreign land, but make no mistake, you live in a culture that is trying to remake you into its image. And I know that for many of you, **you immediately hear that through a political lens**. On the one hand, some of you instinctively think I'm referring to the LGBTQIA2S+ agenda, or the woke agenda. Or, on the other hand, some of you think I'm referring to Christian nationalism or the MAGA agenda. But the reprogramming of our modern-day Babylon is so much more pervasive than that if you would stop and open your eyes and look at the influences in your life. All around you, the culture is trying to mold you into its

image, make you over to be one of them. We are bombarded by **advertisers and marketers** trying to convince us that we need more stuff, a better car or truck, bigger house, newer phone, better beer, if we are going to be happy. It's the **YOLO, pursuit of happiness** mindset that teaches you to focus on yourself and what will make you happy and not to worry about other people. It's our **porn-saturated culture** trying to seduce you into believing that pornography is more satisfying than intimacy with a real person. It's a **food culture** trying to convince you to overeat and to fill your body with artificial ingredients and unhealthy food. It's **pharmaceutical companies** convincing you that the answers to all your problems are found in medications. It is **songs and movies** teaching you that that if you don't have true love and aren't experiencing that happily ever after life, then something is wrong. It's a **therapy culture** that relabels sins as disorders. It's a **sports culture** trying to take over every moment of every day, including the Lord's Day, with games. It's a **gambling and lawsuit culture** trying to convince you that you can get rich – and happy – quick. It's a **tech culture** trying to convince you that constantly entertaining yourself is what you need, that being bored is a terrible crime and every bit of silence must be filled with noise and distraction. And yes, it's a **political culture** trying to convince us to trust in politicians and lawmakers to make our world a better place. I know I am speaking in generalities, but I hope you get the point. Open your eyes and consider how all around us are forces trying to isolate, indoctrinate, and seduce us, to make us over into our culture's image.

So what are we going to do about it? Let me take the strategies one at a time so that we can consider how to resist the reprogramming.

Isolation

King Nebuchadnezzar tried to separate the captured Israelites from their religious heritage and community and devotion to their God. He changed their names to ones associated with Babylonian gods. Soon there would be laws about prayer and worship. They would be isolated from their former way of life.

We do not live in such a repressive culture. Many people around the world do, and must resort to meeting and worshiping in underground churches for fear of punishment or imprisonment or even death. **But even though we do not face such opposition for choosing to gather together to worship, we still open ourselves up to cultural assimilation when we isolate ourselves.** After all, it has never been easier to think we are worshiping God while not interacting with any other of God's people. We can listen to our favorite preachers and worship songs at home. We can read books or listen to podcasts, and do it all while never setting foot in an actual

church or being a part of actual church community. But by doing this, we place ourselves in a dangerous place, without the support or accountability or iron-sharpening-iron that comes from having real relationships with real people who really know us. As the writer of Hebrews put it:

Hebrews 10:23–25 - *Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.* ²⁴ *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,* ²⁵ *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Isolation is a dangerous place to be if you want to live as a faithful exile. Come to church in person if you can. Join a community group. Get in the directory and reach out to each other. Stay after Sundays to meet others. Sit with people you don't know. Take a step out of your comfort zone and resist the isolation that can lead to reprogramming.

Indoctrination

Nebuchadnezzar put the young Israelites through a three-year reeducation program in order to mold them into the Babylonian image, trying to replace what they knew about God with the language and literature and history and values and ways of Babylon. But Daniel knew His God, and he was able to compare what he was taught to God's truth so that he would not be led astray. And if you are going to resist the indoctrination, you need to know God's Word. This needs to be your north star, your plumb line. And you need to **measure everything against God's Word**.

2 Timothy 3:16–17 - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Be like the Bereans:

Acts 17:10–11 - As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

Measure everything against the Scriptures. Just think of the messages you are hearing. How do you know if they are true or not?

“Follow your heart”

“Transgender women are women.”

“Christians need to take back this country for Christ.”

“We need to be anti-racist”

“Everyone should be free to do whatever they want”

How would you determine whether these messages are true or not? Go with consensus? Search your heart? Examine the science? Paul gives us an answer:

Romans 12:1–2 - Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Do not conform to what the world tells you is true, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Let this be your mantra:

Psalms 119:105 - Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Young people, not everything you are being taught is true. I look back at college and wish I could go back and argue. We were products of a godless evolution. Missionaries are arrogant for trying to convert people in foreign lands to Christianity. Jesus was just one among many Jewish messiahs. Ask questions. Seek out answers. Questions are welcome here. Hopefully we will not just tell you what to believe but help you to think, to critically examine the messages you are hearing in this world and to consider what God has to say. This world is trying to mold you into its image. Let God and His Word be your north star, the guiding light for your path.

Seduction

This was the place Daniel really needed to be vigilant, to put his foot down and resist. In so many ways, this world is trying to lead you slowly but surely away from God to the delicacies of Babylon, that you might lose your soul.

“Evil rarely looks evil until it accomplishes its goal; it gains entrance by appearing attractive, desirable, and perfectly legitimate. It is a baited and camouflaged trap.” Klyne Snodgrass

Satan presents the bait but hides the hook. He shows the short-term pleasures but hides the long-term misery. The seduction feels so good – the flirtation, the attention, the drink, the drug, the purchase, the yelling, the laziness, the show, the ice cream. But it will lead to long-term pain. You will reap what you have sown.

John 10:10 - *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

John 8:44 - *You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.*

There is an enemy who wants to destroy you. He prowls around like a roaring lion. And he will offer you the world in exchange for your soul.

Mark 8:36–37 - *What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?*

But there is a Savior who has defeated him, and whose power is available to you by His Holy Spirit. Submit your will to His today and the devil will flee from you.

James 4:7 - *Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

Yes, to resist the seduction of Babylon, it helps to not be isolated, to be in community, to not be indoctrinated but to know God’s Word. But the best way to reduce the power of the seduction of the world is to love God.

Matthew 22:36–37 - “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”
³⁷ Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ”

It’s not about believing in God and doing the right thing and avoiding sin. It’s about loving God more than anything else, so that the seduction of this world, the delicacies of Babylon’s table, lose their attractiveness. As the Psalmist put it:

Psalm 73:25–26 - Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. ²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

The best way to resist seduction and temptation is to love God more than anything else. And that is not something we can just work up on our own. No, as John put it:

1 John 4:19 - *We love because he first loved us.*

See the one who resisted every temptation out of love for you. See the one who loved you so much that He gave His life for you. See the one who took on the enemy and defeated him when you were captive to the enemy, that you might be free, that you might be loved. Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

Resist isolation by staying connected to each other. Resist indoctrination by measuring everything by God's Word. And resist seduction by delighting in the Lord. Get with community. Get with God's Word. And get with God!